NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

A FABLE

Favola

Both oral tradition and the old chronicles of Florentine affairs report the vision of a holy man whose life was universally celebrated by the people of that time. One day while he was rapt in prayer he saw a vast host of souls descending to Hell. These were those wretched mortals who had died without the grace of God; and all of them or the great majority complained that they had been led to this unhappy end only because they had taken a wife.

All this was very surprising to Minos and Rhadamanthus* and the other infernal judges. They could hardly believe that these slanders against the female sex were true and since the complaints grew more frequent every day, they made a full report of the matter to Pluto,* who decided that all the infernal judges should examine the question very thoroughly and then take whatever measures were most apt to discover the falsehood of those assertions or establish the whole truth.

Having summoned them, therefore, to a council, Pluto addressed them as follows: 'My dear subjects, although I possess this kingdom by heavenly disposition and fatal irrevocable destiny so that my heavenly and earthly judgements are not open to objection, yet still for those who hold power the greater wisdom is to submit to the laws and heed the opinion of others. That is why, in a case that could bring discredit upon our empire, I have decided to seek your advice as to how I should act. Every man whose soul comes down to our kingdom says that the fault lies with his wife, and since this seems to us impossible, we fear that if we base our judgements on this report, we shall be condemned as too credulous; and if we do not, we shall appear as lax and regardless of justice. Since the former is the vice of light-minded men, and the latter that of the unjust, we have sought to avoid both accusations; but finding no way of doing so, we have called you together to help us

with your good counsel and ensure that this kingdom will continue to live without scandal in the future as it has done in the past.'

All the infernal leaders thought the matter was very important and deserving of great consideration; but though they were unanimous about the need to discover the truth, they disagreed about the manner of doing so. Some thought they should send one or two emissaries to earth in human form to find out the facts through personal experience; many others reckoned they could save themselves all that trouble by applying various tortures to selected souls. In the end, however, the majority rallied to the idea of sending someone to earth; and since they could find no volunteer for this enterprise, they decided to cast lots. The lot fell on Belphagor,* an archdevil, but one who had been an archangel before he fell from Heaven. Although he was very reluctant to undertake the task, he felt obliged by the command of Pluto to carry out the instructions of the council and to accept the conditions that they had solemnly laid down, which were as follows: that whoever received the commission should be given a hundred thousand ducats to take with him into the world, and that there, in the shape of a man, he should take a wife and live with her for ten years; after which, feigning death, he should return and, on the basis of his experience, testify before his superiors to the toils and troubles of marriage. Also that during the allotted time he should be subject to all the ills and afflictions of mortal men such as poverty, prison, sickness, and every other kind of misfortune, unless he managed to escape them by his own deceit and cunning.

With his human form and his money, therefore, Belphagor entered the world and, having chosen horses and companions from his infernal retinue, made a splendid entry into Florence, the city that he chose above all others for his residence as being most suitable for someone who hoped to employ his money in the practice of usury. Then, calling himself Roderigo of Castile, he rented a house in the district of Ognissanti,* and to head off any attempt to trace his origins, he said he had recently left Spain for Syria and made all his money in Aleppo;* after which he had come to Italy in order to take a wife in regions kinder, more civilized, and more suited to his temperament. This Roderigo was a most handsome man and seemed about thirty years of age. Within a few days he had already given proof of his great riches and shown himself so generous and open-handed that many noblemen who were rich in daughters but poor in cash offered to give him a wife. Among all the candidates, Roderigo chose a very beautiful girl called Onesta, the child of Amerigo Donati who had three other marriageable daughters and three grown-up sons; and though he was of noble stock and highly regarded in Florence, yet he was poor, considering the large family he had to support.

Roderigo arranged a spectacular and magnificent wedding-feast, leaving out nothing that could be desired on such an occasion. And since, according to the law that had been given to him when he left Hell, he was subject to all human passions, he soon began to take pleasure in worldly pomp and circumstance and to bask in the praise of men—all of which involved no mean expense. Moreover, he had not been long with his Monna Onesta before he fell hopelessly in love with her, so that he could not bear to see her sad or displeased in any way.

Together with her beauty and her noble rank, Monna Onesta had brought into the house more pride than Lucifer himself ever had. So, at least, thought Roderigo who had experience of both and gave the prize to his wife. Moreover, her pride became greater than ever when she realized how much her husband loved her; and thinking she could command wherever and whenever she wished, she ordered him about without mercy or respect, not stopping short of foul insulting language if ever he denied her anything. This was immensely annoying for Roderigo, but still he managed to put up with it, partly for the sake of his in-laws and his new brothers and relatives and partly out of respect for the bonds of marriage; but above all because of the love he bore his wife. I shall pass over the huge expense of dressing her according to the latest fashions and satisfying her taste for the new styles that our city has the innate habit of creating. More important was the fact that he could not live in peace with her without helping his father-in-law to find husbands for her sisters, a task that involved considerable sums of money. And then the next thing was sending one of her brothers to the east as a cloth merchant and another to the north with textiles, and to set up yet another as a goldsmith in Florence—all in the interests of domestic harmony. In these things he spent most of his fortune. But that was not all. At Carnival time or on the feast of Saint John the Baptist,* when the rich and noble citizens honour themselves and tradition by providing splendid banquets, Monna Onesta could not lose face among the other ladies and insisted that her Roderigo should give entertainments that outshone all the rest.

Roderigo bore with these things for the reasons I have already given; nor, serious though they were, would he have found them too burdensome if they had given him peace at home and some calm while he awaited his ruin. But what happened was the opposite. Because along with the intolerable expenses, it was his wife's irascible character that caused him endless trouble. There was no manservant or maid who who could stand her for longer than a few days, so that Roderigo suffered the serious inconvenience of not having any faithful servant to attend to his business. And even those devils whom he had brought with him as supposed members of his

household preferred to go back and suffer the fire of Hell rather than live on earth subjected to her command.

With this turbulent and restless way of life and its unchecked expenses, Roderigo had already spent the cash he had brought with him and was now living on the profits that he hoped to get from the western and eastern ventures; and since his credit was good, he thought to avoid losing status by borrowing. Soon there were so many of his promissory notes in circulation that he was well known to every moneylender in the market. Just when his situation was beginning to look serious, bad news came from the west and the east. One of Monna Onesta's brothers had gambled away all the money he had received from Roderigo, and the other was drowned when his ship went down, laden with merchandise and completely uninsured. No sooner was this made known than Roderigo's creditors gathered together and came to the conclusion that he was ruined. They could not, however, take any measures immediately because the payments were not yet due; and so they decided that it would be wise to keep a close watch on him lest he slip away in secret. Roderigo, for his part, seeing no solution to his problems and aware of the infernal laws that bound him, was looking for some way to escape, and one morning, he took to horse and galloped out of the Prato Gate which was not far from where he lived. As soon as they realized that he had left, the creditors raised a hue and cry, first informing the magistrates and then sending their agents after him along with a rowdy mob.

Roderigo was not more than a mile from the city when he heard the noise behind him; and seeing that things were going badly, he decided to put them off the scent by leaving the highway and trying his luck across the fields. This, however, was made difficult by the many ditches that cross the countryside and make riding impossible, so he was forced to leave his horse by the roadside and go on foot. Crossing field after field, covered with the vines and reed-beds that abound in that region, as he neared Peretola,* he came to the house of Gianmatteo del Brico who worked for Giovanni del Bene; and there by chance he found Gianmatteo himself who was just bringing the oxen home to be fed. Roderigo begged Gianmatteo to save him from the enemies who were at his heels and who wanted him to die in prison. In return he promised that he would make him rich, and before he left he would give him a convincing proof that he could do so; and if he failed then Gianmatteo could turn him over to his enemies.

Now although he was a peasant, Gianmatteo was a shrewd fellow and reckoned he had nothing to lose by helping the fugitive. So he gave his promise and shoved Roderigo under a heap of manure that stood in front of his house and covered the

whole thing with straw and other rubbish that he had gathered to burn. Roderigo had hardly finished hiding himself when his pursuers arrived, but for all their attempts to scare Gianmatteo they could not get him to admit that he had ever seen the man they were looking for. In the end, they went on their way and, after searching in vain all that day and the next, they returned wearily to Florence.

When they had left and the noise died down, Gianmatteo pulled his guest out and reminded him of his promise. Roderigo answered: 'Brother, I owe you a great debt and I'm determined to pay it off; and to convince you that I can do what I promised I shall begin by telling you who I am.' Then he explained what kind of being he was and by what laws he was bound when he left Hell and how he had taken a wife. He went on to describe the manner in which he intended to make him rich which was this: whenever Gianmatteo heard of a woman possessed by a devil, he should know that he, Roderigo, was the devil involved and that he would never come out unless commanded to do so by Gianmatteo who would then be well paid by her family. With that all settled, Roderigo took himself off.

Not many days passed before the news spread throughout Florence that Messer Ambrogio Amidei's daughter, who had married Bonaiuto Tebalducci, was possessed by a devil. Her relatives had not failed to try all the remedies that are usual in these cases—such as crowning her with the head of Saint Zenobius and the cloak of Saint John Gualberto*—all of which were treated with contempt by Roderigo. And to prove to everyone that this really was a case of demonic possession and not the fruit of some wild imagination, he spoke in Latin, discussed philosophical problems, and amazed his hearers by revealing the hidden sins of many people—among them a monk who had kept a woman in his cell for four years disguised as a novice. Messer Ambrogio meanwhile was leading a most unhappy life. He had tried every remedy in vain and had lost all hope of curing his daughter when Gianmatteo came and promised to restore the girl's health in exchange for the sum of five hundred florins that he needed to buy a farm at Peretola. Messer Ambrogio accepted the deal and after arranging for a couple of Masses and a few ceremonies to make the whole thing look legitimate, Gianmatteo went up to the girl and whispered in her ear: 'Roderigo, I've come here to see you keep your promise.' To which Roderigo replied: 'That's fine with me, but it's not enough to make you rich. So as soon as I've left here I shall enter into the daughter of King Charles of Naples,* and I won't leave her unless you tell me. So make sure that you get a proper fee, and from then on just leave me alone.' After which he came out of the girl amid the joy and admiration of all Florence.

It was not long before the whole of Italy learned of the terrible misfortune that had befallen the daughter of King Charles. The king had heard of Gianmatteo and since no other remedy could be found, he sent a message to Florence calling him down to Naples. Gianmatteo came and, after a few fake ceremonies, cured the girl. But before leaving Roderigo said: 'You see, Gianmatteo, I've made you rich as I promised. So now, having paid off my debt, I have no further obligations toward you. So make up your mind to stay away from me from now on, because just as I've been good to you in the past, I can do you harm in the future.'

Gianmatteo went back to Florence a very rich man for the king had given him more than fifty thousand ducats, and he thought that now he could enjoy his wealth in peace, even if he did not really believe that Roderigo meant to harm him. But his good intentions were suddenly challenged by the news that the daughter of Louis VII,* king of France, was possessed by a devil. This event seriously disturbed Gianmatteo's mind as he balanced the authority of the king against Roderigo's parting words. The king could find no remedy for his daughter's condition and, since he had heard of Gianmatteo's powers, he first sent a simple messenger asking him to come. But when Gianmatteo pleaded illness as an excuse for refusing, the king felt obliged to appeal to the Signoria,* who forced him to obey. So off he went dejectedly to Paris where he explained to the king that though he had certainly performed some successful exorcisms in the past, this did not mean he could always do so, for there were some devils of such an evil nature that they feared neither threats nor incantations nor the power of religion. He would try to do his duty, but begged pardon in advance if he should fail. The king was furious and vowed to hang him unless he succeeded in curing his daughter. Gianmatteo was terrified, but plucking up courage he sent for the girl; and when she came he whispered in her ear, pleading with Roderigo and reminding him of how he had once helped him and how ungrateful it would be to abandon him now in his hour of need. 'You rotten traitor,' answered Roderigo, 'you dare to come before me like this! You think you can go around boasting about how I've made you rich? I'll show you and everyone else that I can give and take whenever and whatever I please; and before I leave here, I'll have you hanged, that's for sure.'

Seeing that it was no use looking to Roderigo for a solution, Gianmatteo decided to try his luck another way. Sending the possessed girl away, he said to the king: 'Sire, as I told you, there are many spirits who are so malevolent that they are impossible to deal with, and this is one of them. Nevertheless, I want to have one last try. If it works, Your Majesty will have got what he wished for, and so shall I. If it fails, then I'm in your hands and I hope I'll get the compassion that my innocence

deserves. What I propose is this: in the square before Notre-Dame, have a great stage erected, big enough to hold all the nobles and clergy of the city; have it covered with cloths of silk and gold; and in the middle of this stage build an altar. Next Sunday morning hold an assembly there with the clergy and the princes and the barons. Do so with full royal pomp and let them be arrayed in rich and splendid robes. Then, after a solemn High Mass, bring forth the possessed girl. Moreover, on one side of the square I want at least twenty musicians with trumpets, horns, drums, bagpipes, bells, cymbals, and anything else that makes a noise; and when I raise my hat, let them start playing those instruments as they move towards the stage. With all that noise, plus a few secret remedies of my own, I reckon they'll drive that devil out.'

The king gave orders immediately and when Sunday morning came the stage was packed with notables and the square crowded with the common folk; and after the solemn High Mass, the possessed girl was led onto the stage by two bishops and a group of nobles. When Roderigo saw such a vast gathering and such formal proceedings, he was almost stunned and said to himself: 'What does this stupid lout think he's doing? Does he think he can scare me with all this show? Doesn't he know that I've seen all the pomp and show of Heaven and the furies of Hell as well? I'll see him punished for this.' And when Gianmatteo drew near and asked him to come out of the girl, he exclaimed: 'Now this was a bright idea! Where do you think you're going with all this fuss? Do you really hope to escape my power and the king's anger? You scurvy wretch, I'll have you hanged before we're done.' They went on like this for some time, one pleading and the other swearing at him, until Gianmatteo felt that he could not waste any more time. He raised his hat and all those fellows who had been hired to make a noise started playing their instruments and moving towards the stage with a racket that shook the skies. Roderigo pricked up his ears when he heard the noise; not knowing what it was, taken by surprise and dazed, he asked Gianmatteo what was going on. And Gianmatteo, with a distressed air, replied: 'O Roderigo, my friend! I'm afraid it's your wife who's come to find you.'

One can hardly imagine how upset Roderigo was when he heard the name of his wife. The shock to his mind was so great that he said nothing more and without thinking whether it was possible or reasonable for her to be there, he took fright and fled, leaving the girl free. For indeed he preferred to go back to Hell and account for his actions rather than submit once again to the yoke of marriage with all its hassles, squabbles, and dangers.

So it was that Belphagor returned to Hell and bore witness to the ills that a wife brings into the house. And Gianmatteo, who had proved smarter than the devil, went home a happy man.

125 *Minos and Rhadamanthus*: two of the three sons of Zeus (the other is Aeacus) who are demigods and judges in the Underworld. Early Christianity recast the pagan gods as devils.

Pluto: king of the Underworld.

126 *Belphagor*: name derived from Baal, god of the Moabites and Midianites.

Ognissanti: western district of Florence around the church of Ognissanti (All Saints).

Aleppo: great Syrian trading city, a magnet for Florentine merchants.

127 *John the Baptist*: patron saint of Florence; his feast day is on 24 June.

128 *Peretola*: village 4 miles north-west of Florence.

129 *Zenobius . . . Gualberto*: Saint Zenobius was a fifth-century bishop of Florence; Saint John Gualberto (d. 1073) was the founder of a Benedictine congregation known as the Vallumbrosians. A manuscript in the Laurentian Library of Florence recounts how in 1466 the head of Saint John Gualberto was used to

exorcize a girl possessed by an evil spirit. The head then profited from the occasion to reveal the sins of local monks.

130 *Charles of Naples*: Charles d'Anjou (1226–85).

Louis VII: anachronism; the only King Louis contemporary with Charles d'Anjou would be Louis IX (1214–70).

Signoria: governing body of Florence (also in Venice).